

Mali & African Empires

The Legend of Sundiata

A long time ago, when Mali was still small, the wise hunters told the King that he should take a second wife named Sogolon. Though she was very ugly, she would give the King a son. One day, this son would be a great king and a powerful warrior.

When the King's first wife, Sassouma, heard this news she was **livid**.¹ From the moment Sogolon's son, Sundiata, was born she hated him. Sundiata was a slow learner as a child. He crawled on all fours for almost seven years. At first, he could not defend himself. Then one day, Sundiata's father died.

From a hiding place, Sundiata saw his mother, Sogolon, crying. She was afraid for herself and her child. Sogolon knew that her son could not be a great ruler if he crawled. Sundiata was very sad. He made up his mind to walk. It took all of his strength, but he pulled himself up to his feet. Everyone watching him was amazed. They believed that such a determined boy must be destined to fulfill the **prophecy**² of the wise men!

Sundiata's success made Sassouma even more jealous. Sogolon took her son and left Mali out of fear. They moved to the Kingdom of Mema. There, Sundiata stayed with the King of Mema. Under the King's **guidance**,³ Sundiata grew to be a skilled hunter and a great warrior. The King of Mema was so proud of Sundiata that he made him heir to his throne. But Sundiata never forgot his home, Mali. He never forgot that his **destiny**⁴ was to rule his father's kingdom.

While Sundiata was in Mema, his step-brother had become King of Mali. He was a cruel and weak king. His weakness allowed an outsider, Sumanguru, to come and conquer Mali. Sumanguru was very powerful in the ways of witchcraft. He was a terrible King. All of the people in Mali were miserable. They wanted a leader to help them overthrow Sumanguru. Rumors of the situation reached Sundiata. He knew it was time for him to return home.

Sundiata rode back to Mali to face Sumanguru in a great battle. None of Sumanguru's magic spells could defeat the skill and intelligence of Sundiata. **Legend**⁵ says that destiny was on Sundiata's side. He shot an arrow at his opponent. The arrow barely cut Sumanguru's shoulder, but it drained him of all of his magic. The people of Mali unified behind Sundiata. Men came to join him

¹ **livid** – very angry

² **prophecy** – something told about the future

³ **guidance** – direction; leadership

⁴ **destiny** – what will happen as predicted, in spite of efforts to change or prevent it

⁵ **legend** – a story coming down from the past, which many people have believed

from all corners of the Empire. He won the battle against Sumanguru and became the strongest and most powerful person in West Africa. All the world knew the brave warrior as leader of the Empire of Mali.